

University of Groningen

Religion and Socialism in the Long 1960s

Toth, Helena; Weir, Todd

Published in:
Contemporary European History

DOI:
[10.1017/S0960777320000077](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777320000077)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2020

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Toth, H., & Weir, T. (2020). Religion and Socialism in the Long 1960s: From Antithesis to Dialogue in Eastern and Western Europe. *Contemporary European History*, 29(2), 127-138.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777320000077>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.


Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

INTRODUCTION

Religion and Socialism in the Long 1960s: From Antithesis to Dialogue in Eastern and Western Europe

Heléna Tóth  and Todd H. Weir

History Department, Otto-Friedrich-University, Fischstrasse 5/7, 96047 Bamberg, Germany
helena.toth@uni-bamberg.de

One of the most remarkable transformations of European society and politics during the Cold War period was in relations between socialism and religion. Extreme hostility between revolutionary socialism and Christianity had been a structural component of major political conflicts in the trans-war period of 1914 to 1945. With an eye to violence against churches in Mexico, Spain and the Soviet Union, Pope Pius XI had declared in 1937 that ‘for the first time in history we are witnessing a struggle, cold-blooded in purpose and mapped out to the least detail, between man and “all that is called God”’. Upon the German invasion of his native Netherlands in 1940, Europe’s leading ecumenical spokesman Willem Visser ’t Hooft similarly spoke of the Christian struggle against godlessness as ‘a war behind the war’ that had begun ‘long before September 1939 and will certainly go on long after an armistice has been concluded’.¹ This hostility flowed into the accelerating polarisation of European politics and diplomacy in the immediate post-war period that led to the Cold War.² Events such as the exchange of letters between US President Harry S. Truman and Pope Pius XII in 1946 confirming the Christian core of Western civilisation or the show trial of Cardinal József Mindszenty in Hungary in 1949 were moments of deep symbolic significance that welded religion to the solidifying political rhetoric.³ As Dianne Kirby writes, ‘for many who lived through the period, the Cold War was one of history’s great religious wars, a global conflict between the god-fearing and the godless’.⁴ In the 1960s, however, the situation changed dramatically. New encounters between Marxists and Christians challenged the militant anti-religious and anti-socialist rhetoric that had dominated Europe for almost half a century. If the American movie *Guilty of Treason* (1950) about the trial and torture of Cardinal Mindszenty encapsulates at least in part the place of religion in 1950s Cold War culture, the spirit of the mid-1960s was characterised by Paolo Pasolini’s *The Gospel According to Matthew* (1964), for which the Italian Marxist director earned high praise from Catholic and Protestant critics alike and won the special jury prize at the Venice Film Festival.⁵

¹ *Divini Redemptoris*, § 22 (AAS 29 [1937]) Vatican encyclicals online: http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19370319_divini-redemptoris.html. Jurjen A. Zeilstra, *European Unity in Ecumenical Thinking, 1937–1948* (PhD, Utrecht 1995), in partic. 80.

² William Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945–1960: The Soul of Containment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Andrew Preston, ‘The Religious Turn in Diplomatic History’, in Frank Costigliola and Michael J. Hogan, eds., *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 284–303.

³ Diane Kirby, ‘Harry Truman’s Religious Legacy: The Holy Alliance, Containment and the Cold War’, in Diane Kirby, ed., *Religion and the Cold War* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 77–102; Paul Betts, ‘Religion, Science and Cold-War Anti-Communism: The 1949 Cardinal Mindszenty Show Trial’, in Paul Betts and Stephen A. Smith, eds., *Science, Religion and Communism in Cold War Europe* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 275–306.

⁴ Kirby, *Religion and the Cold War*, 1. More recent studies have focused on the political dimensions of personal piety: Monique Scheer, ‘Catholic Piety in the Early Cold War Years, or How the Virgin Mary Protected the West from Communism’, in Anette Vownickel, Marcus M. Payk and Thomas Lindenberger, eds., *Cold War Cultures. Perspectives on Eastern and Western Societies* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 129–51; see also the chapter on religious revival during the early Cold War in the United States. Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore; London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 77–100.

⁵ On the reception of the *Gospel According to Matthew*: Lloyd Baugh, *Imagining the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997). David Tollerton rightly points out that the critical acclaim of the film does not

A signature event of the 1960s was the appearance of 'Christian-Marxist dialogue'. The few historical studies of this movement depict it as an intensive burst of encounters that took place in the mid-1960s. According to Leonard Swidler, the dialogue 'broke out' around 1964 'almost simultaneously in a number of European countries: Czechoslovakia, Italy, West Germany, and France'.⁶ The dialogue transcended national borders and achieved a European and indeed global dimension. At a series of conferences, the international Paulus Society (*Paulusgesellschaft*) brought together Marxist philosophers, scientists, church representatives and theologians from the entire Christian spectrum and from both sides of the Iron Curtain. The 1965 Salzburg conference marked 'the first large-scale international conversation between Christianity and Marxism'.⁷ Following a conference in Herrenchiemsee, Bavaria in 1966, the first conference in a socialist country was held in the Czechoslovak town of Mariánské Lázně in 1967. The Protestant-dominated World Council of Churches (WCC) welcomed Eastern European Marxist thinkers for the first time to its conference in Geneva in 1966.

Yet, soon after 1968, the Christian-Marxist dialogue began to founder. This was in part due to the crushing of the Prague Spring in August 1968, which put a chill on the exchange efforts across Europe. However, it was also part of a wider 'religious crisis of the 1960s' in Western Europe, when, according to the historian Hugh McLeod, the 'more self-confident and optimistic reformism', of the mid-sixties gave way after 1967 to an 'apocalyptic mood . . . with its growing polarisation between radicals and conservatives'.⁸

This religious crisis found certain structural parallels on the other side of the Iron Curtain, albeit there it took the guise of a crisis of secularism. Stalin's death in 1953 had opened the way for new antireligious policies in the Soviet Union and within the Eastern bloc. Whereas Stalin had taken a pragmatic approach to cooperating with the churches due to the exigencies of wartime, Nikita Khrushchev started a campaign in the mid-1950s to promote 'scientific atheism'. Unlike its predecessor during the interwar period, the campaign this time meant not only a mere repression of religion, but, simultaneously, involved an attempt to give concrete contours to atheism, or, as Victoria Smolkin puts it, to 'fill Soviet Communism's sacred space with positive meaning'.⁹ Yet, by the mid-1960s this atheist project also seemed to have reached an impasse.

Thus, the 1960s, particularly the period between the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) and the end of the decade, appears as a window in time, unique in European history, during which conversations between religion and socialism were not only possible, but actively pursued on a broad scale. Historians have sometimes sought to explain this with reference to events immediately preceding this period. In these accounts the preconditions of the dialogue were 'de-Stalinization, relaxations

necessarily correspond to its contemporary reception in general, especially among theology students. David Tollerton, *Biblical Reception, 4: A New Hollywood Moses: On the Spectacle and Reception of Exodus: Gods and Kings* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 6.

⁶ Leonard Swidler, 'Christian-Marxist Dialogue: An Uneven Past – A Reviving Present – A Necessary Future', *The Journal of Peace and Justice Studies*, 2, 2 (1990), 29. Swidler has often reprised this narrative since then, most recently in his *The Age of Global Dialogue* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016). Also, Paul Mojzes, *Christian-Marxist Dialogue in Eastern Europe* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981). Pascal Eitler also agrees with this periodisation: 'Gott ist tot – Gott ist rot': Max Horkheimer und die Politisierung der Religion um 1968 (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus Verlag, 2009), 344–5. In addition, the special issue of *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 15, 1 (1978), 'The Varieties of Christian-Marxist Dialogue', offers a cross section of the participants' ways of historicising the dialogue.

⁷ Roger Garaudy quoted in Erich Kellner, ed., *Christentum und Marxismus – Heute* (Wien, Frankfurt, Zürich: Europa Verlag, 1966), 11.

⁸ Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Hugh McLeod, 'The Religious Crisis of the 1960s', *Journal of Modern European History/ Zeitschrift für modern europäische Geschichte / Revue d'histoire européenne contemporaine*, 3, 2 (2005), 205–30, 221.

⁹ Victoria Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 5.

of East–West tensions, the pontificate of John XXIII, and Vatican II.¹⁰ Indeed, the Second Vatican Council (1962–5) looms large. Its encyclicals *Pacem in Terris* (1963) and *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964), as well as *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), marked a clear departure from the rigid anti-communism of the Catholic church and laid the foundations of a new openness towards ‘the world’ through dialogue in ‘social, political and even religious matters’.¹¹ These encyclicals are seen by historians as crucial for the emergence of Catholic radicalism both in Europe and most famously in Latin America in the guise of liberation theology.¹² Yet, there are good reasons to widen the time frame and speak of what the late Arthur Marwick called the ‘long 1960s’, running roughly from the Suez Crisis of 1956 to the end of the Vietnam War in 1975.¹³ In his history of religion of Western Europe in the 1960s, Hugh McLeod has made use of this periodisation and has pointed to the importance of developments in the late 1950s to what would follow.¹⁴ Significant social changes were underfoot that corresponded to a ‘cautious openness to change’ in religious and political attitudes.

It was with an interest in reframing historical discussion of religion and socialism in the long 1960s that we invited a group of scholars to the University of Groningen for a conference in June 2017.¹⁵ This was the second conference to emerge from the research group ‘Religion and Socialism in the Twentieth Century’, the first of which was dedicated to the ‘Interwar *Kulturkampf*’.¹⁶ In our introduction to this special issue, we summarise some of the key findings of our discussion. In particular, we draw attention to those early dynamics, often overlooked, that were present in Europe in the 1950s and that laid the foundations for novel dialogues of the late 1960s. The aftereffects of these remarkable events continue to reverberate to this day.

Overcoming the Antithesis: Christian Socialism in the Post-War Era

What events first signal the fundamental shifts in the pattern of hostility that generally constituted religious–socialist relations in the first half of the twentieth century? One starting point is found in the call issued by the Dutch politician Willem Banning in 1946 for a ‘breakthrough’ (*Doorbraak*) in the wall between socialism and Christianity. Banning was a Protestant minister who joined the Dutch Social Democratic Party around the outbreak of the First World War and rose to become a leading figure in the party. He was not the first European Christian Socialist, indeed there had existed a Christian element to socialism since the early nineteenth century. However, pre-war Christian Socialists were doubly marginalised. They were often looked down upon by rank and file socialists, who were drawn to the radical potential of anticlericalism and the natural scientific worldview. At

¹⁰ Paul Mojzes, ‘The Current Status of the Christian-Marxist Dialogue and Suggested Guidelines for Conducting the Dialogue’, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 15, 1 (1978), 3. Or more detailed: ‘the preconditions of its commencement were the death of Stalin (1953), the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1956), polycentrism among Communist parties, emergence of humanistic Marxism, improved international relations in light of the gradual cessation of the Cold War, the pontificate of John XXIII, the Second Vatican Council, Protestant reluctance of absolute condemnation of communism, and participation of Eastern European churches in the World Council of Churches’. Paul Mojzes, *Christian-Marxist Dialogue in Eastern Europe*, 36. Most recently about the effects of Vatican II in Eastern Europe: Piotr H. Kosicki, *Vatican II Behind the Iron Curtain* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2016).

¹¹ *Gaudium et spes*, point 28. ‘Respect and love ought to be extended also to those who think or act differently than we do in social, political and even religious matters. In fact, the more deeply we come to understand their ways of thinking through such courtesy and love, the more easily we be able to enter into dialogue with them.’

¹² Gerd-Rainer Horn, *The Spirit of Vatican II: Western European Progressive Catholicism in the Long Sixties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹³ Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy and the United States, c. 1958–1974* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

¹⁴ McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*.

¹⁵ The conference was generously funded by a Royal Dutch Academy of Science international conference grant and by the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies of the University of Groningen. The editors gratefully acknowledge this important support.

¹⁶ See the contributions to the special issue ‘Europe’s Interwar *Kulturkampf*’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 53, 3 (July 2018), guest editor Todd Weir.

the same time, they were generally scorned by their church brethren, who had traditionally defended monarchy, authority and the Christian state. What was new with Banning was the attempt to overcome this marginalisation and to create a social democracy that embraced religious and secular followers alike.

As Arie Molendijk argues in his contribution to this special issue, the *Doorbraak* idea proposed by Banning in 1946 aimed to establish a new social paradigm in Dutch society. At the end of the nineteenth century, another Dutch Reformed minister, Abraham Kuyper, the great architect of Neo-Orthodoxy and inspiration to modern American fundamentalism, had argued that Dutch politics and society were cleaved by an ‘antithesis’ between the Christian and the secular parties. Kuyper and his followers used the antithesis to argue for separate schools and other institutions for Catholics and the Neo-Orthodox. Thus rather than one (secular) national culture envisaged by liberals, Dutch society underwent a pillarisation into Catholic, Neo-Orthodox, liberal and socialist milieus. Rather than trying to Christianise the socialist milieu, Banning wanted to overcome the antithesis altogether. This, we argue, was a crucial step in making later encounters between socialists and Christians possible. Banning was both a typical intellectual precursor of socialist–Christian dialogue, as well as an architect of the later paradigm shift in European society and politics. His pioneering efforts anticipated by more than a decade the 1959 Bad Godesberg Program of the (West) German Social Democratic Party (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*; SPD), which is frequently held up as the point at which West European socialism departed from a mandatory Marxism. Often overlooked in the history of German socialism is that this secularisation of the SPD was accompanied by earnest encounters with church leaders and a philosophical rejection of a politics of worldview.¹⁷

Precisely how socialist conversations of the 1950s were reflected in Christian circles is shown by another biography, that of Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, who became one of the most influential constitutional thinkers of post-war West Germany. In the late 1950s this Catholic conservative came to a strategic embrace of social democracy out of commitment to democracy. Historians have argued that social democratic parties in post-war Europe distanced themselves from Marxism out of political rationality to enlarge their electoral basis and in response to the political exigencies of the Cold War.¹⁸ However, Böckenförde’s story speaks to a more fundamental engagement by socialists with religion and anticlericalism and not merely tactical manoeuvring. As Mark Ruff demonstrates in his article here on Böckenförde, the jurist carefully monitored changing socialist attitudes towards ideology and religion before joining the SPD. Taken together, the biographies of Banning and Böckenförde show how the crucial steps to overcome the antithesis directly contribute towards the trend of depillarisation of European societies in the 1960s.

Christian–Marxist Dialogue

Encounters that had been unthinkable before were now turning into emblems of a new kind of relationship between Marxism and religion. In the mid-1960s both the Vatican and the WCC opened up avenues for dialogue. In the wake of the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church established a Secretariat for Non-Believers in 1965 that gave an institutional form to the new emphasis on dialogue.¹⁹ A year earlier, the Paulus Society, an organisation established by the German Catholic priest Erich Kellner in 1955 to foster conversation between Marxists and Christians about natural science, shifted its focus and grew into one of the most significant forums for the exchange of ideas between Christians and Marxists. It held a number of high-profile conferences between 1965 and 1967.

¹⁷ Karl Dietrich Bracher, *Zeit der Ideologien: Eine Geschichte Politischen Denkens im 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Dt. Taschenbuch-Verl., 1985).

¹⁸ Stephen Padgett and William E. Paterson, *A History of Social Democracy in Postwar Europe* (London: Longman, 1991), 13, 110.

¹⁹ Jeonghun Shin, *Kirche als Weltforum. Zum Dialogverständnis in kirchlichen Dokumenten seit dem Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2010).

The dialogue was conducted amidst ever increasing media attention, in part due to the extended coverage of the Second Vatican Council, and in part sustained through its own journals.²⁰ Karl Rahner, one of the main participants of the Paulus Society and a key theologian of the Second Vatican Council, co-founded the *Internationale Dialog-Zeitschrift* in 1968; in Austria, *Neues Forum*, a periodical established with funding from the Congress of Cultural Freedom in 1954, became, after breaking its ties with the CIA in the early 1960s, a central forum for publications on the dialogue under its editor-in-chief Günther Nenning.²¹ Other platforms for discussion, especially since the early 1970s, also emerged overseas, notably the US-based *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*. Alongside these forums, the dialogue became established as a topic in academic programmes: whether the Monday Dialogic Seminars of Milan Machovec at the Charles University in Prague or the courses of the Darmstadt chapter of the Protestant Student Union starting in 1963 under the direction of Martin Stöhr.²²

Erich Kellner formulated the core aim of the dialogue in 1966: 'let me be clear about this. For this society, a dialogue between Christian theologians and Marxist ideologues is not a matter of politics, tactics or method, but a question of science and humanity. Even more radically: a matter of the self-respect of the human spirit'.²³ The challenges of the technological revolution or the threat of mutual nuclear annihilation were non-partisan issues that both Christian theology and Marxist philosophy had to respond to regardless of the immediate power-dynamics of the Cold War. The purpose of the conversation, according to Kellner and Rahner, was not to inform political action but to identify (or develop) 'core positions' that enabled conversation in the first place.²⁴ When Roger Garaudy, a member of the Central Committee of the French Communist Party proposed in his *From Anathema to Dialogue* (1965) that the Christian position on subjectivity and transcendence had relevance for Marxism, it sent the message that a new kind of conversation was possible with ultimately higher stakes than changing political constellations.²⁵

When Kellner and his colleagues framed the dialogue in such ambitious terms, they made an earnest case for the urgency of developing a framework for a genuine exchange of ideas but they also distanced their dialogue from other types of Christian–Marxist encounters. Jan Milič Lochman, a Czechoslovak Protestant theologian, distinguished between 'political theology' and 'politicised theology'.²⁶ He argued that true dialogue would generate the first one: a theology that reflects on the political and social responsibilities of church in modern society, while the second one amounted to the

²⁰ For a collection of newspaper reports and other media coverage of the first conferences of the Paulus Society see Erich Kellner, ed., *Dokumente der Paulus-Gesellschaft*, 15 (München: Paulus-Gesellschaft, 1966). Eitler, 'Gott ist tot – Gott ist rot', 246–51. On the media coverage of the Christian-Marxist dialogue at the World Council of Churches, Ondřej Matějka, 'Social Engineering and Alienation between East and West: Czech Christian-Marxist Dialogue in the 1960s from the National Level to the Global Arena', in Michel Christian, Sandrine Kott and Ondřej Matějka, eds., *Planning in Cold War Europe* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2018), 165.

²¹ David McLellan, 'Christian–Marxist Dialogue', *New Blackfriars*, 49, 577 (June 1968), 462–7.

²² Matějka, 'Social Engineering and Alienation', 178; Christian A. Widmann, 'Vom Gespräch zur Aktion? Der "christlich-marxistische Dialog" und die Politisierung des Protestantismus in den 1960er und 70er Jahren', in Klaus Fitschen, ed., *Die Politisierung des Protestantismus: Entwicklungen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland während der 1960er und 70er Jahre* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 128. Also, see the description of the curriculum for a course on the Marxist-Christian dialogue in Robert G. Thobaben and Nicholas Piedscalz, 'Teaching a Course on the Marxist-Christian Dialogue', *The Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 15, 1 (1978), 178–96.

²³ Erich Kellner, 'Dialog aus Verantwortung', in Erich Kellner, ed., *Christentum und Marxismus – Heute* (Wien, Frankfurt, Zürich: Europa Verlag, 1966), 18.

²⁴ Roland Boer describes this phase of the dialogue: 'the desire for "core" positions; relatively little engagement with actual texts; a tendency to romanticise communism in light of Marx's earlier texts; and its extraordinarily Euro-American focus. Again and again, one encounters efforts to identify the core of both Marxism and Christianity'. Roland Boer, *Red Theology: On the Christian Communist Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 119.

²⁵ Harvey Cox, 'The Marxist-Christian Dialogue: What Next?', Herbert Aptheker, ed., *Marxism and Christianity. A Symposium* (New York: Humanities Press, 1968), 21.

²⁶ Jan Milič Lochman, *Marx begegnen. Was Christen und Marxisten eint und trennt* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1975), 116.

involvement of theology in polemics or justifying policies borne out of the exigencies of the power and political constellations of the day.

Reconciliation was not the only mode of dialogue in this era. Arguably, the Paulus Society organisers also constructed their forum as an alternative to Christian–Marxist encounters characteristic for the 1950s: dialogue as a strategy of church politics in communist states. The *topos* of dialogue was an established tool in communist church politics, as Heléna Tóth argues in her contribution to this special issue. It fulfilled a series of roles. First, in combination with repressive measures against the churches, it functioned as a method of ‘divide and rule’. Dividing church representatives into ‘reactionaries’ and ‘progressives’ helped communist regimes to start a conversation with one group while marginalising the other. This could take several forms. Some of them were institutionalised, such as the so-called ‘peace priest’ movement in Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland, in other cases the strategy was applied more flexibly on the level of local politics.²⁷ The fact of a conversation between church and state – within the unequal power dynamics of state socialism – presented several advantages for the state: it served as evidence to the outside world of the freedom of conscience, thereby strengthening the state’s legitimacy abroad, while it also created conflicts within church structures. This discursive strategy was most often applied together with physical violence and intimidation. Second, socialist states also deployed the *topos* of the dialogue between Christianity and Marxism as a means to brand-mark supposed ideological enemies or reinforce Marxist orthodoxy.

Switching Sides: Apologists as Agents of Dialogue

A remarkable feature of the 1960s were the many moments of personal transformation, whereby antagonists switched sides or at least came to assimilate elements of the (former) ideological enemy. This was a surprising twist in the history of apologetics. In the course of the nineteenth century the European churches developed a host of university chairs, popular journals and lay organisations, designed to defend the faith in the modern era. By the late nineteenth century socialism featured, alongside secularism more generally, as the greatest threat to the churches in many regions of Europe, outstripping or complicating the existing inter- and intra-confessional strife generated by competition. Yet, as argued elsewhere, the concept of apologetics can be usefully applied to understand socialism and secularism as well.²⁸ Like the churches, socialist organisations and communist states felt the same need to refute the criticisms of those outside the camp, to strengthen the convictions of those within, and to win new converts. They often developed specialised organisations tasked with combating church influence.

In the 1960s many apologetic organisations, whether clerical or communist, changed their function. Instead of serving as bastions of defence, they started to function as conduits for conversations and conversion. From its origins in the early twentieth century, the Protestant-dominated ecumenical movement had used joint opposition to the threat of secularism as a glue to hold Christians together. From its foundation in 1948 the WCC saw itself as a bulwark against communism. Yet, by the 1960s it had become an important arena for dialogue with socialism and other social movements.

Similar developments can be shown in Catholic organisations, in particular Catholic Action, a wide-ranging effort launched globally by Pius XI in the 1920s to fight secularism through a network of lay organisations. Gerd Rainer Horn has shown that already in the 1940s Catholic Action became a seedbed for the development of ‘worker priests’ in France and Belgium, who, out of their sympathy for the plight of the working class, began to develop sympathy for socialism. Some of these priests were an

²⁷ Peter C. Kent, ‘Religion and the Changing World Order: The Roman Catholic Church and the Global Crises of 1956’, in Carole Fink, Frank Hadler and Tomasz Schramm, eds., *1956: European and Global Perspectives* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2006), 265.

²⁸ Todd H. Weir and Hugh McLeod, eds., *Defending the Faith: Politics and Apologetics in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: OUP, forthcoming).

inspiration to the Latin American leaders of liberation theology of the late 1960s. Horn has also revealed that many of the leaders of the New Left of the late 1960s had begun the decade as members of Catholic lay organisations.²⁹ In Italy, former members of Catholic Action of the late 1930s forged an influential circle of intellectuals who during the waning years of the war sought to ‘make Marxism come true within a Christian perspective’. After the war they became known as the *cattocomunisti* (Catholic Communists).³⁰ Parallel developments have been noted among leading Catholic intellectuals, such as Jacques Maritain, who moved from hostility to socialism to an accommodation with it in the course of their shift away from conservative affinities in the 1930s and 1940s.³¹

The relevance of apologetics to understanding religious–socialist interactions is less surprising when one considers that the desire to defend was also combined with the desire to convert and that both stimulated deep encounters with the ‘faith’ of the other. The effort to overcome the enemy was a key component of the interest that had originally motivated partners from both sides in the Christian–Marxist dialogue. As a Marxist philosopher at the Charles University in Prague pointed out at the end of the 1960s: ‘ten years ago, we began to talk to each other with the thought at the back of our minds that the other side would slowly wither away or break up’.³² Some of the prominent Weimar-era socialist ‘apologists’ moved from being advocates of anticlericalism to advocates of dialogue. Two of the supporters of the SPD’s 1959 Bad Godesberg Program were Willi Eichler and Paul Löbe, each of whom had once had impeccable secularist credentials. The former had led a splinter group thrown out of the SPD in 1925 for its hardline anti-religious agitation, while the latter was active in the Breslau Free Religious Congregation, which propagated an immanentist, scientific worldview. Yet, after the war, both became prominent among those socialists seeking to reconcile socialism and Christianity.

The revival of the anti-religious campaign in the Soviet sphere of influence after Stalin’s death also set in motion dynamics that ultimately resulted in apologetics generating dialogue. The purpose of the campaign was to return to objectives more characteristic of early Soviet religious policy and to operationalise atheism in everyday life. Despite the differences in the constellations of domestic politics of individual states, this generated comparable initiatives across Eastern Europe: in East Germany Walter Ulbricht declared the ‘ten commandments of socialist ethics’ in 1958, and the same year in Czechoslovakia first secretary of the Communist Party, Antonín Novotný, ‘emphasised the necessity of forging “moral and political unity” and . . . closely linked this kind of unity with “finishing the cultural revolution”’.³³ In Hungary, too, starting in the early 1960s, party officials in charge of cultural politics aimed to close what they considered an increasing gap between economic development and a lagging cultural revolution. In contrast to the anti-religious campaign of the interwar period, which was based on an assumption that destroying the institutional basis of religion would disrupt religious practice, in the late 1950s socialist states changed their goals, methods and strategies. While they still aimed to reduce religious practice, there was an increasing awareness and acceptance of the fact that this was going to be a long process.³⁴ While intimidation, physical and psychological, against clergy remained part of the repertoire of church politics, socialist states increasingly invested into the study of the phenomenon they wanted to defeat.

Starting in the late 1950s expert groups were set up to study religion from a variety of academic perspectives: ethnological, anthropological or sociological. One unintended consequence of investing

²⁹ Gerd-Rainer Horn, *Western European Liberation Theology. The First Wave (1924–1959)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Gerd-Rainer Horn, *The Spirit of Vatican II: Western European Progressive Catholicism in the Long Sixties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); contribution to the 2017 Groningen conference.

³⁰ Daniela Sarasella, ‘The Movement of Catholic Communists, 1937–45’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 53, 3 (July 2018), 644–1, 650.

³¹ James Chappel, *Catholic Modern: The Challenge of Totalitarianism and the Remaking of the Church* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

³² Quoted in McLellan, ‘Christian–Marxist Dialogue’, 463.

³³ Matějka, ‘Social Engineering and Alienation’, 170.

³⁴ Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty*, 133–41.

into such research was that social scientists often turned from executors of an ideological program into key figures in the Christian–Marxist dialogue.³⁵ Milan Machovec at the Department of Philosophy at the Charles University in Prague belonged to this group, becoming a regular participant at international Christian conferences.³⁶ Similar examples can be found also in socialist countries with no comparable liberalisation to that of Czechoslovakia in the 1960s. With some caveats, Olof Klohr, chair for ‘scientific atheism’ at the University of Jena in East Germany, could also be included in this group. Klohr attended and organised international conferences on the sociology of religion and atheism and argued for the necessity and possibility of a Christian–Marxist dialogue.³⁷

The second unintended corollary of the atheist campaign and the broad scientific study of religion was a new understanding of religious practice. In her contribution to this special issue Justine Quijada shows this shift through the case study of the representation of shamanism in atheist journals in the Soviet Union, *Atheist (Bezbozhnik)* and *Science and Religion (Nauka i religiia)*. While in the earlier stages of the atheist campaign shamanism was presented from a ‘socio-cultural’ perspective, articles in the late 1960s treated altered states of consciousness as a ‘bio-chemical’ phenomenon, worthy of further study.³⁸ The implication of the first approach was that the shaman delivered merely a performance to deceive his flock, the second was potentially sympathetic to religious consciousness. Quijada argues that as long as religion was understood exclusively through the categories of power relations and class, the Soviet state had a clear position as an opponent of religion, but ‘if altered states of consciousness are due to universal human biology, the articles [in atheist journals] offer[ed] no clear indication of what the relationship between altered states of consciousness and the Soviet state should be’. The articles about shamanism in the late 1960s reflect a broader shift in attitude towards understanding belief and rituals: instead of presenting them as a mere invention of religious institutions, creators of socialist culture now were convinced that they fulfilled a fundamental anthropological function. This shift reveals a striking parallel to developments in Western Europe and the United States, where some anthropologists began to see shamanism not as a primitive form of worship but as one with countercultural lessons for the West.³⁹ Creators of socialist culture came to the realisation that despite the ideological and institutional advantages that the spiritual planned economy of state socialism bestowed upon scientific atheism, they also had to compete in an increasingly broad field of spiritual possibilities.

Decolonisation and Opening up Ecumenism to Socialism

Secondary literature on the globalisation of the ecumenical movement usually cites the 1961 New Delhi conference of the WCC as the beginning of ‘the conversion of the WCC from being a movement largely of West European Protestant churches to being a truly *world* movement’.⁴⁰ The Delhi conference framed the global expansion of the WCC, with twenty-three new members, which included members from African countries, further members from Asia, Latin America and, also for the first time, four Orthodox Churches from Eastern Europe, including Russia, Bulgaria, Romania and

³⁵ Further examples: Zsuzsánna Magdó, ‘Romanian Spirituality in Ceaușescu’s “Golden Epoch”: Social Scientists Reconsider Atheism, Religion and Ritual Culture’, in Betts, *Science, Religion and Communism*, 90–1; Patrick Hyder Patterson, ‘The Shepherd’s Calling, the Engineers’ Project, and the Scientists’ Problem Scientific Knowledge and the Care of Souls in Communist Eastern Europe’, in *Ibid.*, 55–76.

³⁶ Ondřej Matějka, ‘Between the Academy and Power: Czech Marxist Sociology of Religion (1954–1970)’, in Ulf Brunnbauer, Claudia Kraft and Martin Schulze Wessel, eds., *Sociology and Ethnography in East-Central and South-East Europe. Scientific Self-Description in State Socialist Countries* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2011), 107–33.

³⁷ On Olof Klohr, see the contribution of Heléna Tóth in this special issue.

³⁸ Birgit Menzel, ‘The Occult Underground of Late Soviet Russia’, *Aries*, 13, 2 (1 Jan. 2013), 269–88.

³⁹ Andrei Znamenski, ‘Toward the Ancient Future: Shamanism in the Modern West’, in Andrei Znamenski, *The Beauty of the Primitive: Shamanism and the Western Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 233–73.

⁴⁰ Madathilparamil Mammen Thomas, *My Ecumenical Journey* (Trivandrum: Ecumenical Publishing Center, 1990), 252.

Poland.⁴¹ This expansion prompted the development of a new attitude in the ecumenical movement towards socialism in two, somewhat conflicting, ways. First, it challenged the Euro-centrism of the WCC and lent more weight to those members who had been developing their own ideas of a Christian–socialist synthesis in the context of decolonisation for decades; secondly, it raised the question of whether and to what extent church representatives from socialist countries would try to move the WCC towards adopting a more positive attitude towards socialism.

The Orthodox churches were not the first church representatives at the WCC from behind the Iron Curtain: Protestant churches from Hungary, Czechoslovakia and also East Germany had been represented among the members through the 1950s, even if with severe limitations.⁴² The inclusion of the Russian Orthodox Church, however, raised suspicions of the possibility of Soviet influence.⁴³

In his article for this special issue Udi Greenberg takes the 1966 Geneva conference of the WCC on ‘Church and Society’ as the starting point of his exploration for the shifts of economic thought within the organisation. In many ways the Geneva conference fits well into the spirit of the age, where Christians and Marxists looked for common solutions for what they considered the joint challenges of technical process and rapid social change. In its final statement, the conference identified ‘nationalising the means of production in the framework of central planning’ as the basis for a Christian and socialist order. Greenberg, however, makes a case for tracing the evolution of this Christian–socialist synthesis to the collapse of European empires and the rise of Afro-Asian nationalism. Ever since the nineteenth century Protestant elites had believed Christianity’s vitality depended on its expansion in Asia and Africa. The unfolding of decolonisation, many maintained, meant that evangelisation could only succeed if it embraced and supported the national movements in India, Vietnam, Ghana and elsewhere. Denouncing Western imperialism and capitalism as intertwined, Asian and African leaders – both Christian and not – often viewed socialism as necessary for post-colonial liberation. Greenberg traces the linking of anti-colonialism with left-wing critique within the ecumenical movement since the late 1940s and shows in turn how European Protestant elites started to abandon their previous anti-socialism in the 1950s and even advocated for radical socialist policies, such as global redistribution of wealth. By 1966, according to Greenberg, the shift in ecumenical thinking about redistribution, almost twenty years in the making, had been completed: ‘socialism, once materialism’s disturbing manifestation, had become ecumenism’s ally’.⁴⁴

The Crisis of 1967 to 1969

The awareness that dialogue with socialism was desirable was also accompanied by the realisation that the conditions that had made it possible might also be undermining Christianity. Thus, just as ecumenical leaders sought to extend the circle to include dialogue not just with Catholics, Orthodox and Jews, but also with secular movements, such as Marxism, they realised that this might lead to a dissolution of the entire project of ecumenism. In 1966 the head of the information service of the

⁴¹ Katharina Kunter and Annegreth Schilling, ‘Der Christ fürchtet den Umbruch nicht’, in Katharina Kunter and Annegreth Schilling, eds., *Globalisierung der Kirchen. Der Ökumenische Rat der Kirchen und die Entdeckung der Dritten Welt in den 1960er und 1970er Jahren* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 32.

⁴² The political background of Eastern European members of the WCC was complex: church representatives allowed to attend the conferences were usually briefed by the State Bureau of Church Affairs of their respective countries and their activities were closely monitored. They also often used the platform of the WCC to endorse pro-Soviet policies. Peter Morée, ‘Allies Against the Imperial West. Josef K. Hromádka, the Ecumenical Movement and the Internationalisation of the Eastern Bloc since the 1950s’, in Kunter and Schilling, *Globalisierung der Kirchen*, 167–88; Tibor Fabiny, Jr. ‘The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and its Aftermath in the Lutheran Church. The Case of Bishop Ordass’, in Hertmut Lehmann and Jens Holger Schjørring, eds., *Im Räderwerk des ‘real existierenden Sozialismus’. Kirchen in Ostmittel- und Osteuropa von Stalin bis Gorbatschow* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003), 31–40.

⁴³ Lucian Leuștean, *Eastern Christianity and the Cold War 1945–1991* (London, New York: Routledge, 2010); Gerhard Besier, Armin Boyens and Gerhard Lindemann, *Nationaler Protestantismus und ökumenische Bewegung. Kirchliches Handeln im Kalten Krieg 1945–1990* (Berlin, Duncker & Humblot, 1999).

⁴⁴ See Udi Greenberg’s article in this special issue.

WCC Philippe Maury wrote that ‘many young people today are turning away from the ecumenical movement itself, and not just from its institutional manifestations – the ecumenical Council, youth movements, Christian organisations; they are demanding that the movement be widened to a generalised, simply human ecumenism, that does not take Christianity as a criterion’.⁴⁵

The ambivalence is also apparent in the Catholic dominated ecumenical organisation, Concilium, which in 1970 published a book with the remarkable title *Post-Ecumenical Christianity*. In it, the General Secretariat of Concilium suggested that Christian–Marxist dialogue could be seen as part of the (post-)ecumenical direction, even if it was not technically ecumenical. ‘The confrontation between all religious convictions should lead to a situation where belief is no longer divisive but unifying, and thus can play its part in the unification of mankind. The basis of ecumenical dialogue remains the historical solidarity of mankind, in the vital awareness that this solidarity is constantly threatened’.⁴⁶ Yet, like his Protestant counterparts, Yves Congar was aware that this step was also threatening Christianity. The danger of ‘secular ecumenism’ was that ‘an adjective can in fact devour its noun’. In other words, secularism might win out over the spiritual.⁴⁷

The rapid shift in the late 1960s to a deep crisis of confidence in the ecumenical movement was paralleled by developments in Christian–Marxist dialogue. By the end of the 1960s the rift between a commitment to working on a common ground for first principles and the imperative for political and social action grew into an insurmountable difference. Although there was not one cataclysmic event that broke the dialogue apart, one symbolic moment was the Paulus Society’s 1968 conference in Bonn, where, for the first time, representatives of the new left were invited to participate.⁴⁸ The students and members of the extra-parliamentary opposition (*Außerparlamentarische Opposition*) refused to follow the Paulus Society’s established patterns of discussion culture. The students took over the Bonn conference and wanted to pass a resolution about the massacre of students in Mexico. The organising committee refused, and when they left the room the conference was declared a failure. The students, broadly left to their own devices, ‘proceeded to sing the Internationale, but had serious difficulties with the lyrics’.⁴⁹ As Günther Nenning, the editor of the *Neues Forum* formulated: ‘the Paulus Society was blown up by the students’.⁵⁰ The differences ran, however, not only or not strictly along generational lines. Students found inspiration and allies in prominent figures of the dialogue, notably Ernst Bloch or Protestant theologian Helmut Gollwitzer, whose house became a meeting point and ‘refuge’ for such emblematic figures of the student movement as Christa Ohnesorg and Rudi and Gretchen Dutschke.⁵¹

While new leftists in Germany were accusing the dialogue of impotence and irrelevance, its Marxist representatives in Czechoslovakia, most of them proponents of the ‘third way’, were being targeted as potential enemies of the state after August 1968.⁵² The Christian–Marxist dialogue counted among the markers of liberalisation that the Soviet Union refused to tolerate.⁵³ In the period of ‘normalisation’

⁴⁵ As quoted in: Yves Congar, ‘Do the New Problems of our Secular World make Ecumenism Irrelevant?’, in Hans Kung, ed., *Post-Ecumenical Christianity* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 11–21, quotation 11.

⁴⁶ Concilium General Secretariat, ‘Ecumenism in Search of an Identity’, in Kung, *Post-Ecumenical Christianity*, 145–60, quotation 160.

⁴⁷ Congar, ‘New Problems’, 14–5.

⁴⁸ Widmann, ‘Vom Gespräch zur Aktion?’, 121–49.

⁴⁹ Karl Rüdiger Dierth, ‘Evolution oder Revolution der Gesellschaft? Internationaler Kongreß der Paulus-Gesellschaft in Bonn’, *Junge Kirche*, 29 (1968), 731–2.

⁵⁰ Günther Nenning, ‘Paulus-Gesellschaft studentisch gesprengt’, *Neues Forum*, 15, 178 (1968), 633.

⁵¹ Claudia Lepp, ‘Helmut Gollwitzer als Dialogpartner der sozialen Bewegungen’, in Claudia Lepp and Harry Oelke, eds., *Umbrüche. Der deutsche Protestantismus und die sozialen Bewegungen in den 1960er und 70er Jahren*. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht, 2007), 227. Gretchen Dutschke writes about the four ‘fathers’ of the movement: György Lukács, Helmut Gollwitzer, Herbert Marcuse and Ernst Bloch. Gretchen Dutschke-Kotz, ‘Die vier Väter: Lukács, Gollwitzer, Marcuse, Bloch’ in G.D.K., Jürgen Miermeister and Jürgen Treulieb, eds., *Rudi Dutschke, Die Revolte. Wurzeln und Spuren eines Aufbruchs* (Hamburg: Reinbek, 1983), 10.

⁵² Lochman, *Marx begegnen*, 7.

⁵³ On speculations on the relationship between the conferences of the Paulus Society and the Prague spring: Wilfried Daim, ‘Fragen zum Dialog’, *Junge Kirche*, 29 (1968), 318–20.

following the invasion Machovec and his colleagues were punished for promoting a 'theological form of the anti-communist theory of convergence' and were forced out of their academic positions.⁵⁴ The crushing of the Prague Spring also forced participants of the dialogue outside of Czechoslovakia to redefine the parameters of Christian–Marxist encounters. The *International Dialogue Journal* (*Internationale Dialog-Zeitschrift*), for example, restated perhaps most radically their commitment to the dialogue as a whole: the editorial introduction of the first issue of 1969 referred discreetly to the 'European events of August 1968' and formulated a new mission statement: 'sterile polemics will be avoided. Instead, the journal will soon publish contributions by prominent personalities from the USSR. The dialogue, as it is practiced here, does not exclude anyone on principle and it is not fixated on a specific social model as if it was the only one worthy of entering into a dialogue with'.⁵⁵ This sentiment was not shared across the board between the participants of the dialogue: while the rejection of polemics was not contested and neither was a preference of a specific social model debated, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia nonetheless raised fundamental questions about the limitations of the dialogue.

Conclusion

In a paper given at a symposium in 1967 and published a year later, Harvey Cox claimed that

The dialogue between Christian thinkers and various types of Marxists is not as new as recent reports would suggest. It goes back to the very beginning of the Marxist tradition, and the present vigorous dialogue is more a revival than a beginning. However hard it is to imagine now, future historians might chronicle the period of Pope Pius XII and Stalin as the high point in an episode of negative antagonism in what could eventually be an overall history of active and mutually valuable discussion.⁵⁶

The articles in this special issue both confirm and contradict this statement by this preeminent American theologian of secularisation. We have seen that that intellectual history of reconciliation proceeded from the interwar and wartime period. It was conducted by figures like Willem Banning, who came from the minority of religious socialists, but also by figures on both sides of the interwar culture war, such as Jacques Maritain and Willi Eichler, who in reaction to fascism and war switched from persecutors to mediators. It is also true that the passing of first Stalin and then Pius XII were crucial openings for dialogue.

However, we find that what Cox called the 'negative antagonism' and what we have called the antithesis was not an interregnum in an otherwise healthy dialogue between socialism and Christianity. Instead, the antithesis was the constitutive framing of the relationship, which fully marginalised religious socialism. It began not at the start of the papacy of Pius XII or even Pius XI but stretched back into the nineteenth century. The weakening of this antithesis also began earlier than Cox proposes. Transformations of the religious field were already palpable in some corners in the early 1950s and these prepared the ground for the dialogues of the 1960s. Alongside depillarisation in Europe, decolonisation was a global process that fed into this transformation.

In Cox's essay 'The Marxist-Christian Dialogue: What Next?', the author gave an optimistic answer to his own question. He could not be aware of the crisis that would engulf the dialogue in August 1968. The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and the rising revolutionary movements in South America posed the question of the primacy of cooperation over conversation with new urgency. Participants

⁵⁴ As Ondřej Matějka points out 'Ironically enough, Milan Machovec (one of the founding fathers of Czech scientific atheism in the early 1950s) earned most of his income for the greater part of the 1970s from his part-time job as the organist at Saint Antonin's church in Prague-Holešovice, which he obtained thanks to his dialogic reputation in Catholic circles'. Matějka, 'Social Engineering and Alienation', 186.

⁵⁵ 'Vorwort der Schriftleitung', *Internationale Dialog-Zeitschrift*, 2, 1 (1969), 1.

⁵⁶ Cox, 'The Marxist-Christian Dialogue: What Next?', 15.

in the dialogue and historians since have wondered whether the turn to cooperation was a result of changing political circumstances or whether it was an almost inevitable outcome of the dialogue itself.⁵⁷ By the end of the Cold War the Christian–Marxist dialogue appeared to belong to the past. John Paul II made a partial return to the antithesis and promoted a vigorous anti-communism and suppressed liberation theology within the church. Mikhail Gorbachev’s sudden opening to the Russian Orthodox Church and their joint millennial celebration of St. Vladimir in 1988 might be taken as part of the last act of Soviet state socialism, rather than as a fresh start.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Manfred Spieker, *Neomarxismus und Christentum. Zur Problematik des Dialogs* (München: Schöningh, 1974), 227. William W. Mayrl, ‘The Christian-Marxist Encounter: From Dialogue to Détente’, *Sociological Analysis*, 39, 1 (1978), 85. Christian Widmann distinguishes between various phases within the dialogue: the ‘dialogue’, the ‘metadialogue’ (i.e. the discussion about the dialogue itself), and places liberation theology in the category of the ‘postdialogue’. Wiemann, ‘Vom Gespräch zur Aktion?’, 139.

⁵⁸ Widmann, ‘Von Gespräch zur Aktion?’, 137. Manfred Spieker, *Neomarxismus und Christentum. Zur Problematik des Dialogs* (München: Schöningh, 1974), 227.